

Mugabe beyond the pale: not the way to govern Zimbabwe

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This article was originally published in *The International Herald-Tribune* on 28 February 2002. At that time, current FRIDE Director General Pierre Schori was Sweden's ambassador to the United Nations. He led the EU observer mission for the presidential election in Zimbabwe on March 9 and 10 2002, but was expelled from the country before the ballot took place.

Last Friday, after my expulsion from Zimbabwe on February 16 and the consequent departure of the other observers from the European Union, two members of the South African observer mission were attacked while meeting with members of the leading opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change.

The meeting place was surrounded by more than 200 members of ZANU-PF Youth, a branch of President Robert Mugabe's ruling party. The building was stoned and at least two MDC members were taken to the hospital. The South African car was also stoned.

On Sunday three observers from the Southern African Development Community were attacked by ZANU-PF elements in Chinhoyi. A car belonging to the Commonwealth observer team was also stoned.

These incidents confirm one of the elements of my report to the 15 EU foreign ministers in Brussels, namely, that compared with the parliamentary elections of 2000, violence is greater and has spread to urban areas.

This time various government branches are interfering more brutally in favor of the president. Military top brass recently declared that they would not accept an election result which went "against the revolution." Freedom of the media and the right of citizens freely to express their views have been drastically restrained by new laws, just in time for the elections.

In my case, the Immigration Office was unleashed upon me four times in order to force my signature on a document in which I would state that I was in Zimbabwe on holiday.

The reason for this was that, according to the government, a tourist cannot talk to the press or be employed. It was clearly said that talking about the EU mission would be seen as a political statement and hence a breach of law, as well as "working" in that mission.

As I had not entered the country with a tourist visa nor ticked "tourist" in the appropriate box of the entry form at the airport, it was necessary for the government to get me to sign in as a tourist. They would then feel free to restrict my speech and activity as head of the EU observers.

I refused to do so, while expressing admiration for the beauty of the country, so they canceled my visa and ordered me to leave the same day.

The government had invited the EU (with the exception of Britain) to observe the elections. Then, when the EU had designated me as chief observer, the authorities excluded another five states. The remaining mission would also have to be integrated with the ACP group, which consists of 77 countries from Africa, the Caribbean and Pacific regions, and come under its leadership, a surprise also to the ACP.

Given the restrictions and harassment that we were confronted with, I came to the sad conclusion that this was no environment for a credible and effective EU election observer mission.

The only other time I have been expelled from a country was in October 1969, during the colonial dictatorship in Portugal. The reasons: for meeting with the opposition leader, Mário Soares, later the democratically elected prime minister and president, and also, ironically, for Sweden's support of the liberation struggle in Southern Africa, including that of Robert Mugabe.

Eight years later, at a UN anti-apartheid conference in Lagos, Mugabe asked to meet me and Olof Palme, then Sweden's opposition leader. Mugabe thanked us for our solidarity and expressed admiration for Sweden. He said he wanted to send his wife Sally to study our social welfare system.

The European Union has supported Zimbabwe ever since its independence in 1980. Today Zimbabwe receives two-thirds of all its foreign assistance from the EU; the aid is mainly focused on poverty alleviation and anti-AIDS projects. Zimbabwe also has trade privileges for export of tobacco, beef, cut flowers and ferro-alloys.

President Mugabe has been in power since 1980. Our recommendations after the 2000 elections said that it was imperative for the government to move swiftly to re-establish the rule of law and to act against those who had been involved in human rights abuses.

Instead the human rights situation has worsened with increased political violence and severe restrictions on the media and political parties. All this is in contradiction with international standards for free and fair elections.

The EU foreign ministers agreed on Feb. 18 that Zimbabwe was in violation of the Cotonou Agreement, signed in June 2000, which regulates, for the next 20 years, an integrated framework of privileged relationships between the EU, the largest donor and trade partner of developing countries, and the 77 ACP countries. The agreement covers trade and investment policies, development aid and the environment, gender issues and culture, institutional reforms and political dialogue, good governance, human rights, democratic principles, the rule of law and the involvement of civil society.

The EU wants to build a strong partnership with a democratic Zimbabwe and has shown its commitment to this goal for more than 20 years.

African leaders met last year in Abuja, Nigeria, to discuss Zimbabwe. Nigeria, South Africa, Mozambique and Malawi have since voiced their concern, as has UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan in a Jan. 15 statement.

This is not a confrontation between developed and developing countries. It is not about “the EU being an arrogant bully with colonial attitudes,” as the government newspaper, The Herald, keeps repeating. It is a matter of universal values, laid down in the UN Charter and the Cotonou Agreement.

It is about the principles that the peasant is equal to the president on election day, that the power of the people lies in the secret vote, that the revolutionary legitimacy of the bullet must be replaced by the democratic legitimacy of the ballot.

Above all, it is about how we must work together in this increasingly unjust, highly competitive and globalized world, where sound economic performance, good governance and international cooperation are a must.

In Zimbabwe the Cotonou Agreement is encountering its first major challenge. Developed and developing countries must forge new and lasting relations in forthcoming UN conferences, in March in Monterrey, Mexico, on financing for development, and in September in Johannesburg, on sustainable development.

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